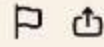




Chapter 76



[POV Amen]

The midday heat weighs heavy on the palace walls, yet inside the war room, I shiver.

Sweat beads on my brow and run down my temples, even as a cold spreads through my body. I press my hands to the carved cedar table, trying to find strength in limbs that feel strange and weak.

Before me lies a trade agreement waiting for my royal seal. The papyrus is filled with careful hieroglyphs about grain deals with Hittite merchants.

These should be simple matters of state needing little effort. But the symbols blur before my eyes, turning into shapes I cannot read, into languages I have never learned but somehow understand.

"Your Majesty?" Vizier Amenemhat's voice reaches me as if through water, distorted and distant.

I blink, forcing my focus back to the chamber, to the concerned faces of my advisors watching their Pharaoh with barely concealed alarm.

"Proceed," I manage, my tongue thick in my mouth. "The terms are acceptable."

The vizier hesitates, eyes narrowing slightly at my discomfort.

He has served three kings before me; he recognizes weakness when he sees it. But he is discreet, offering only a shallow bow before continuing his discourse on border security.

This affliction has become too strong to hide lately.

What began something like a month ago, small pains like headaches behind my eyes or momentary lapses in attention during morning audiences, has grown into something that threatens my very rule.

A Pharaoh cannot show weakness. A living god cannot reveal human frailty.

Yet here I am, the divine fragment of Osiris burning like molten gold within my chest, while my mortal flesh grows weaker by the hour.

I have seen the whispers among my courtiers, noted the concerned glances exchanged by my personal guard.

They believe I suffer from exhaustion, from the strain of maintaining constant vigilance over Neferet since our joint ritual. A plausible explanation I have not discouraged.

The truth turned out to be far more troubling.

"Your Majesty!" The vizier's alarmed cry reaches me an instant before I realize I am falling.

My knees strike the polished floor with a force that should bring pain, yet I feel only a curious numbness spreading through my limbs.

The chamber tilts around me, columns seeming to bend as if made of reeds rather than stone. Through tunneling vision, I see my advisors rising in panic, guards rushing forward.

Then darkness claims me.

* * *

The royal physicians move around me like anxious birds, their hands

cool against my fevered skin as they check for physical ailments. Incense smoke curls through the air – sacred blends meant to drive away malevolent spirits.

One holds a polished obsidian mirror beneath my nostrils to measure my breath; another presses fingers against my throat, counting the erratic flutter of my pulse.

"His Majesty's heart races like a hunted gazelle," murmurs the youngest, his brow furrowed with concentration.

"Yet his skin grows cold," counters another, lifting my limp hand to demonstrate.

I recognized the eldest physician, Penthu, the one who has served my family since I was a child. He studies me with eyes that have witnessed three generations of royal illnesses.

His rough fingers trace the area above my heart, staying where the fragment of Osiris pulses beneath my skin like a second, smaller heart.

"Perhaps," he suggests carefully, choosing each word with the precision of a scribe, "the divine fragment within His Majesty is causing disturbance."

The other physicians draw back slightly, unwilling to venture opinions on matters divine rather than physical. Osiris's curse is known to them, but its workings remain beyond mortal medicine's reach.

"Leave us," I tried to command, but my voice was a hoarse approximation of its usual authority.

When the chamber has emptied, I force myself to a sitting position despite the room's insistent spinning.

The ritual with Neferet should have sustained me much longer.

Our spiritual communion during our lovemaking, the very drop of her blood had seemed to strengthen rather than drain me.

Unless...

I press my palms against my eyes, trying to quiet the whispers growing louder inside my head. Voices speak in languages long forgotten in Egypt.

Memories that are not my own flood through the fragile walls of my mind.

The taste of wines made centuries ago. The feel of ruined palaces beneath feet that turned to dust long before I was born.

Past vessels of Osiris reach out to me across time, their experiences bleeding into mine as the divine power inside me grows weaker.

* * *

When the next episode comes, it strikes with the swiftness of a cobra.

One moment I am reviewing architectural plans for a new temple at Karnak, the next – I am on my knees, vision fracturing into prismatic fragments as blood drips from my nose onto the alabaster floor.

The room dissolves around me.

I am no longer Amenhotep, the Pharaoh of Upper and Lower Egypt, the one who after an enemies' strike on his family was forced to take the throne shortly and rule the kingdom at a still young age.

I was a succession of men stretching back through uncounted generations.

I die in battle, an arrow piercing my throat.

I die in sleep, old and revered.

I die beneath an assassin's blade, betrayed by those I trusted.

Each death floods through me, each moment of passing when the fragment transferred from one vessel to the next.

Through the kaleidoscope of ancestral memory, I was still able to hear the door open. Soft footsteps approach, and gentle hands touch my shoulders. "Amen?"

Neferet's voice anchors me, pulling me back from the abyss of fractured consciousness.

Her touch is cool against my fevered skin as she supports my trembling form, guiding me toward a nearby couch. With infinite tenderness, she wipes the blood from my face, her fingers steady despite the concern etched across her features.

"How long has this been happening?" she asks, her voice soft but insistent.

I study her face, grateful to see her eyes clear today – pure green, untainted by Seth's crimson influence.

In these increasingly rare moments of lucidity, I glimpse the woman I fell in love with, the priestess whose strength matched my own.

"At this state... almost a week," I admit, reluctant to add my burdens to the divine battle she wages daily. "It seems to become more frequent. More severe."

She nods, unsurprised by my confession, as if confirming something she already suspected.

already suspected.

Her fingers trace the contours of my face, lingering at my temples where pain pulses in rhythm with my heartbeat.

"The physicians suggest it's the divine fragment," I continue, leaning into her touch despite myself. "But the timing is wrong – it's too soon for the effects to wear off after our last ritual."

Something shifts in Neferet's expression, a shadow of guilt, perhaps, or resignation. She takes a deep breath, as if preparing herself for something difficult, something she has been avoiding.

"Amen," she says finally, her voice heavy with dread, "I think I know what's happening to you."

End *of* *The* **Chapter**

Chapter 76



Comments

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Gifts

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